

Descent To Darkness

by AllyKat D

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Summary: Jarod is captured and Lyle devises a way to make him cooperate.

1. Chapter One: No Mercy

Descent to Darkness

by Allie Davidson

Mrs. Parker, as Brigitte preferred to be addressed, licked her lollipop and stared at a DSA screen showing a sim of young Jarod working with Sydney. This DSA she had discovered was one of the few left in the Centre of Jarod and Sydney; Jarod possessed the others.

Young Jarod sat at a table; a large aerial photo of a walled compound and surrounding streets covered the table's surface. "The embassy is vulnerable to attack here and here," Jarod pointed to a three story building outside the walled compound, then he pointed to a secondary gated employee entrance. "A sniper has easy access to the three story building across the street, and it would take only a small force of four to five men to gain access to the embassy compound through the poorly guarded side gate."

"What are your suggestions, Jarod," Sydney asked.

"Since this building is unoccupied, the best solution is to destroy it." Jarod again indicated the three-story building. "As for the gate, it should be guarded by guards here and here, and another guard positioned on the parapet wall up here. The gate should be replaced and security cameras placed in these areas. Considering the gate's current construction, a vehicle travelling approximately 30 miles an hour could destroy it with little damage to the vehicle itself."

Sydney patted Jarod on the shoulder. "I'm certain our clients will be pleased with your suggestions. Sydney nodded then smiled down at him.

Jarod looked up and returned the smile Brigitte hit the still button. _How Cute._ She took the lollipop out of her mouth, frowned then reversed the DSA, stopping again on the scene where Jarod and Sydney smiled at one another. Brigitte giggled. She retrieved her cell phone out of an inside coat pocket, flipped it open then dialed a number with her thumb. Her called was picked up on the second ring.

"Hi love," she said. "Could you do something for me? Could you get rid of Sydney?" She nodded at the voice on the other side of the connection. "Yes, that's perfect. And see what you can do to get Broots and Miss Parker away from the Centre. Where?" She paused, listening to the voice on the other end of the connection, then threw back her head and laughed. "Miss Parker will love that."

Brigitte closed the cell phone with a decisive click, sucked on her lollipop and stared at Jarod and Sydney smiling at one another. _Sweet,_ she thought to herself, _just like father and son._ She stuck the lollipop in her mouth, turned to her desktop computer, opened up a new word processor file and began composing an obituary.

* * * *

Anger tightly leashed, Miss Parker strode into Broot's office. Sam hovered behind her.

"We're leaving," she ground out. "The Centre's jet is ready. Sam will take you home so you can pack. I'll meet you at the airstrip."

Broots looked up from the computer screen. "Jarod?"

"No, the Easter Bunny. Hop hop, now," she snapped. "Of course it's Jarod."

"I can't leave Debbie behind," Broots said as he stood and shrugged on his coat.

"Bring her. We're going to Disneyworld."

"Disneyworld!" Broots burst out.

"You know, Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse," she paused and looked Broots up and down, "Goofy?"

* * * *

Miss Parker glanced at her watch. Thirty minutes to closing time and the crowds had thinned; employees made up the majority of the park's crowd. Debbie pulled Broots into the Pirates of the Caribbean line for one final ride. At least those two were enjoying themselves. Sam stood at her side and scanned the crowd. A tip had come in that Jarod was working at Disneyworld as one of the strolling Disney characters. Pluto ambled into view talking to Minnie Mouse. Indistinctly she heard their voices. She motioned to Sam and they faded behind a balloon stand. Minnie and Pluto walked closer.

"Jared, meet me at the employees entrance in an hour and we'll go get dinner," Minnie said.

"Sounds good, see you then" answered a deep voice muffled behind the heavy mask. Pluto waved as Minnie walked away.

"That's him!" Miss Parker hissed to Sam. She signal Sam to stay put as she started forward. The big costume limited Jarod's line of sight and that would work to her advantage. Miss Parker walked behind him, pulled her gun, leaned close and pushed the barrel against his ribs.

"Don't think I won't plug you in Disneyworld, Wonderboy," she said, her voice smug. "If you want to get out of here without a bullet hole in your guts, you'll walk quietly along with me."

"Please... Don't shoot!" cried a muffled voice from inside the costume. "I'll go with you."

"That's right you will." Miss Parker jerked her head toward Sam and her joined her.

"I want you to follow Sam," she instructed Pluto, "and I'm right behind you, so don't cause any problems and no detours to any fire hydrants."

Pluto nodded vigorously. They escorted Pluto out of the park and to their car. Miss Parker opened the car door and Sam shoved Pluto inside. He sprawled against the leather seats.

"Now don't you look cute," Miss Parker said, smiling as she sat next to him. She reached over and yanked off the Pluto mask. "But Pluto just isn't right. I always expected you to be the Road Runner."

The kid with long stringy blonde hair who stared at her was not Jarod. "The... the roadrunner is uh Warner Brothers," he stuttered.

Miss Parker stared. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Jared," the kid said, his voice trembled and he cringed against the seats. "Please, don't hurt me."

Miss Parker opened the car door and tossed the Pluto head out onto the asphalt then turned and grabbed the frightened kid by the neck.

"Run away Pluto, and if you tell anyone you've seen me I'll have you neutered."

She shoved him toward the opened door, planted her foot on his ass and gave him a hard shove. He scrambled to his feet and ran without looking back.

* * * *

The falling rain mingled with the tears on Jarod's face. From the cover of trees on a knoll above the cemetery, he watched the funeral. At this distance, and through the sheets of pouring rain, he thought he could see Miss Parker and Broots, Michele and Nicolas all huddled together watching the casket lower into the ground. The tree bark scratched against Jarod's cheek as he wrapped one arm around a tree trunk, slid to the wet ground and wept, not caring that the rain

soaked into his jeans or plastered his hair against his head. At this moment the world could disappear and he wouldn't have care.

Sydney was dead.

If he could call anyone father, it would be Sydney.

"Couldn't resist coming here, could you, luv," said a smug female voice. "Time to come home my wayward prince."

The wet leaves had muffled the footsteps of the sweeper team that crept out of the forest and surrounded him. Jarod didn't care and bowed his head toward the damp ground. He didn't even have the will to move when a 9mm gun barrel indented the flesh on his temple. Two men grasped either arm and jerked him to his feet. He sagged between them. Brigitte walked into his view. She brushed her gun barrel under his chin.

"Cheer up, Jarod. No one lives forever," she quipped with a mock pout. "Not even Sydney."

Jarod looked up and into Brigitte's smirking face and sorrow turned to rage. Who was she to mock Sydney's death?

"Damn you!" Jarod bellowed and lunged at her. His sudden movement took the two men off guard and he pulled from their grasp. Jarod lunged and tackled Brigitte taking her down with him into the muddy ground. He straddled her and wrapped his hands around her throat. For the first time he saw that smug smirk wiped off her face as he squeezed. She grabbed his wrists and tried to wrest them from around her throat. Hate and rage smothered rational thought and lent him strength.

A gun butt slammed into the back of his head. He ignored the pain. Blood streamed down his temple and splattered onto Brigitte's face and across the tree trunk. Four men wrestled him away. A hard kick to his ribs brought a strident wave of pain; another kick to the side of his head blurred his vision. He curled into a fetal position trying to protect himself. The abuse continued.

Brigitte holding her bruised throat and gasping for breath was the last thing he saw before the woods wavered out of focus, then went black

* * * *

Sydney only partially listened to the speaker who lectured on ground-breaking research into the psychology of twins. So far the conference had been interesting. He visited with colleagues he hadn't seen in years and enjoyed the sites of Milan, Italy. Despite this, something bothered him, a creeping sense of unease and an unshakable feeling that the Centre sent him to Italy to get rid of him. Why? There was only one thing that really mattered to him and that was Jarod. If the Centre felt compelled to send him away that could only mean it had to do with Jarod.

At intermission, instead of mingling and discussing the lecture with colleagues, he made his way across the hotel lobby and up the elevator to his room. In his room he picked up the phone and dialed Miss Parker's direct number. When no one answered, he tried Broots;

no answer there either. He use the operator option on the Centre's phone system and the main switchboard operator picked up.

"This is Sydney Green. I'm calling from Italy. Miss Parker isn't answering her phone," he said to the women. "Could you locate her please."

"I'm sorry, but Miss Parker is out of town."

"Out of town?" Sydney echoed. "Where is she?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that information over the phone."

"Yes, I understand. Could I speak to Broots?"

"I'm sorry again, Mr. Green, but Broots is not available."

Sydney didn't press the operator for more information. That Broots and Miss Parker were unavailable simply confirmed his suspicions that something was going on. He hung up the phone, stared out the window for a moment then picked up the phone again and dialed another number. "I would like to change my reservations." He gave his flight information to the reservation operator. "You have a flight this evening? That would be fine. Please book me a seat."

* * * *

"Jarod, you're being uncooperative," Lyle said with false kindness and wagged his finger.

Jarod struggled against the restraints; both wrists and ankles were manacled. He was locked in a small cell room similar to the one he had occupied during his earlier years at the Centre. Once, he thought he heard the distinctive squeak of the wheels on Raines's oxygen tank and heard the man's raspy breathing, but he never saw the man.

"I'd go to hell before I'd ever help you," Jarod ground out.

Lyle shrugged. "Now _ that _ can be arranged. Hell will be a cozy warm place compared to where you're going." Lyle motioned with one hand and a nurse appeared. She held a hypodermic needle. "In fact, you'll soon be begging to help me."

"What! What are you doing to me!" Jarod's frantic eyes went to the hypodermic needle in the nurse's hand. She approached him and he struggled. Two husky men, sweepers by the look of them, held him down while the nurse tied a length of surgical tubing around his arm. She whacked a finger against his arms, then slipped the needle into a fat vein, pushing the plunger, releasing the drug into his bloodstream. "No!" he screamed and arched backwards.

Euphoric warmth spread throughout his body, starting at his toes and working up to his head, tingling along his scalp. A seductive peaceful feeling washed over him. His struggles ceased. He fell back on the bed, closed his eyes and breathed deeply. The numbness was bliss. Pain, hatred and anger wavered, then blew away like fallen leaves in a breeze. Lyle stood over him, his face oddly contorted and his voice sounding like it came from the end of a long tube. His lips didn't move in sync with his words.

"How long before he's addicted?" he asked.

"Four doses at the least, six on the outside," the nurse answered.

"How often?"

"Sometimes twice a day, sometimes once, depends on the individual and when they become sick. That is when you give them more."

"The make sure he gets it when he needs it." Lyle leaned over Jarod. "Enjoy your trip." Lyle disappeared and the clang of the cell door closing echoed over and over through Jarod's mind.

* * * *

"Daddy, that trip was a waste of time and if I had to speculate, I would say it was a decoy."

"Decoy?" Mr. Parker chuckled. "Now Angel, Brigitte gained that information from a very reliable source."

"And who would that be, Mickey Mouse?" Miss Parker asked with mock politeness.

Brigitte opened the door and sauntered into Mr. Parker's office. Miss Parker suppressed the overwhelming urge to punch that smirk off the other woman's face, or at least shove that lollipop in a more appropriate place.

"Didn't find anything, Miss Parker?" Brigitte taunted as she snuggled into her new husband's arms. Her voice sounded more husky than usual.

Miss Parker's expression hardened. "You tell me Brigitte. What was I suppose to find?"

Brigitte shrugged then smiled up at Mr. Parker, rubbing noses with him. Miss Parker wanted to puke. Then she noticed something; finger shaped bruises colored the skin around Brigitte's neck. The woman had tried to cover it with makeup, but the purple-yellow bruises were still visible. Miss Parker wondered if she'd have to stand in line for the privilege to wrap her fingers around Brigitte's neck.

"Well, why you two are locking lips, I have work to do." Miss Parker stalked out of her father's office as Brigitte's insufferable giggling followed her out. She slammed the door and came face to face with her brother.

"Bad hair day?" Lyle said pleasantly. He smiled at her and clasped his hands behind him.

Miss Parker stood close to her brother, ran a hand up his tie then grasped it and yanked him close. "If I find something has been going on behind my back, and that something has to do with Jarod, you're going to be singing soprano in the women's Sunday church choir."

* * * *

Jarod didn't know how long he'd been in his cell room. The nurse would show up once a day, sometimes twice with a dose of the drug. At first he fought the nurse and the men who came with her, then he looked forward to her visit, and to the drug that slithered through his veins making him forget everything, who he was, what he wanted, why he was here and most importantly Sidney's death. The pain faded further away with each dose until the hurt was an abstract annoyance and no longer important.

He didn't know how many days had passed when the nurse came in and gave him something to drink. She didn't have the hypodermic needle with her and it took all his strength not to beg. He was thirsty and drank the mildly medicinal tasting liquid.

Whatever it was, it cleared his mind and made him painfully alert, brought everything that had happened to him into sharp focus and made him think of things that he didn't want to think of. Lyle walked in, tipped his head like a friendly puppy.

"Looking for this?" Lyle held a hypodermic needle just out of Jarod's reach. "I can see it in your eyes. You help me and I'll help you."

"Yes," he finally whispered and hated himself for it and hated Lyle's triumphant expression. "I'll help you."

"I thought so." Lyle motioned behind him and two Centre guards walked into the room. "Get him a shower and clean clothes."

They didn't have to bother with the manacles; those had disappeared days ago, they were no longer needed. Jarod didn't have the strength or the will to leave. He stood and followed them down a long unmarked hallway dimly aware this was a Centre sublevel, although the usual Centre personnel were absent. He felt a little better with a shower and clean clothing, but the craving lurked and his stomach churned. One of the guards motioned him out of the lavatory.

The guards escorted him to the end of the hall and through a heavy steel door. Too tired to be surprised, Jarod entered a newly constructed simulation room. The difference between this simulation room and the others he had worked in was size; this room rivaled the size of school gym.

At one end of the room, a miniature detailed model of a city was constructed across several long workbenches. A life-size stage set complete with buildings, streets and live-size cardboard mockups of pedestrians spread across the remainder of the room. The style and architecture of the buildings were Spanish and vaguely familiar. A man and a woman, whom Jarod did not recognize, sat at a fold-out desk.

Lyle nodded toward the man who stood and approached them.

"It's your show now, Monsieur Boutroux," Lyle said, gesturing to Jarod.

"Does he understand French?" the Frenchman asked.

"Oui," Jarod said, replying in French.

For the next two hours Monsieur Boutroux took Jarod around the life-size stage, and then to the model of a city. Somewhere in Spain or perhaps Portugal, Jarod guessed judging by street layout and the architecture. He committed a few unusual landmarks to memory. He wondered if he would remember, or if he would ever need to. Lyle followed them, sometimes asking Jarod to translate.

"How many in the motorcade?" Jarod asked the Frenchman as the man pointed out a route through the city.

"Six cars, four men in each and all armed. The individual we seek will be riding in the forth car."

Jarod hesitated then glanced up at Lyle who patted his suit jacket, a reminder that relief would be withheld if he didn't cooperate.

"You need to split the motorcade, the goal being to separate the first three guarding vehicles from the target vehicle." He pointed a stoplight. "Position one of your men here at this corner. He needs to blend in with pedestrian traffic, perhaps read a paper or sit at this café. He will handle a device that can change the light from green to red to strategically split the motorcade. Here in the intersection, stall a large vehicle to prevent the last two cars from veering around or escaping in an unplanned direction. With gunfire from men in these position here and here," he pointed to buildings on either side of the street, "you need to startle the target vehicle into moving down this street here. The desired destination is this area." He pointed to a small village-like square several miles to the west of the stoplight.

"And how can we make certain they'll go there," Boutroux asked.

"A series of impassible obstacles. More stalled cars, working construction crews." Jarod swallowed, braced both hands on the table then looked up, he avoided looking at Lyle. "Is your goal assassination or kidnapping."

"Kidnapping," the Frenchman said.

After several hours of detailed information, the drug that the nurse had given him began to wear off. Barely able to control the tremors in his hands, and sick at his stomach he yearned for the drug to ease his pain. He took a deep thankful breath when the Frenchman turned to Lyle.

"Your man was most helpful," Boutroux said. He and Lyle shook hands, then he motioned to his female partner and she pulled a laptop from a computer case. "My assistant is transferring the remainder of the fee into your account."

"Pleasure to do business," Lyle said.

* * * *

Miss Parker breezed into Broot's office, stood in front of his desk with her arms cross and stared down her nose at him. "I don't like being summoned like a pet dog. You better have something for me," she said.

Broots squirmed in his seat then motioned her over. "It's not what I've found," he said in a low voice, "but what I haven't found."

"Get to the point."

"Yes, well, you see I always find a trace of Jarod somewhere, but for the last week I've found nothing. It's like he's just disappeared."

Miss Parker braced her hands on Broots's desk and leaned over. "What? Is this going to turn into a game of twenty questions? Just tell me what the hell you're talking about."

"Jarod is gone. I found out where he was a week and a half ago. Look." Broots extracted a lined note pad from a drawer, several pages held copious notes. "He was working for the Sierra Club as an environmental lawyer. Then, according to the employee I spoke to, he told them he needed time off to attend a funeral and never came back. The firm had his apartment checked and all his belongings are still there. They have reported him to local police as a missing person."

"A funeral?" Miss Parker said, more to herself. "Have you found anything on that?"

"Nothing. Jarod doesn't have any family," Broots paused and cleared his throat, "well at least none that he can find."

"Good job Broots," Miss Parker said, laid a hand briefly on his shoulder. "Keep looking."

* * * *

Jarod sat on his cot, sweat poured down his face, his clothing was soaked, his breath was short and fast. His entire body shook and needle sharp pains spiked up him arms and legs.

"You were very good today," Lyle praised him like a trained dog. He held up a hypodermic needle. "Looking for this? You earned it."

The nurse was no longer needed, neither were the guards to hold him down. Jarod snatched the needle from Lyle's hand. Holding one end of surgical tubing between his teeth and grasping the other end in his right hand, he pulled it tight around his upper arm. Lyle watched as he injected the drug

"This was too easy," Lyle said, disgust in his voice.

Jarod was beyond caring. He sought the drug's solace; he had to have the peace it gave him. He didn't hear Lyle leave, only the door closing and locking behind him.

Jarod's eyelids fluttered as the drug oozed through his bloodstream. If hell did existed, he had found it.

End of Part I. Continued in "The Devil you Know"...

Descent to Darkness Part II: The Devil you Know

By Allie Davidson

Lyle sat behind a two-way mirror and watched Jarod and Dr. Raines work on a hijacking sim.

"Now this is a sight," he said to Brigitte who sat in a chair behind him in the observation room.

The woman leaned forward and rested her forearms on the back of the folding chair in front of her. "Who would have ever thought the lab rat would willingly work with Doctor Frankenstein."

"He knows what happens if he doesn't."

"How do you know he's not lying and sabotaging the sims?"

Lyle lifted one eyebrow and his eyes never left Jarod as he replied. "I've been over that with him. Let me just say that he has incentive to make certain our clients are successful."

"I won't ask what that is," Brigitte.

"You don't want to know."

Since he and Brigitte captured Jarod, there was no lack of clients needing their advice, or rather the advice of their pretender. Lyle wasn't concerned with what his clients required; he didn't care if Jarod help the clients plan the annihilation of an entire country as long as he collected his fee.

Jarod was an extraordinary man, though Lyle would never admit the awe he felt watching Jarod work. The problem with Jarod was that he cared too much about the little people, and that was a weakness to be exploited. Jarod still didn't know that Sydney wasn't dead. Lyle wasn't going to tell him. He wanted Jarod dependent, helpless and without hope.

"Many hijacks fail due to lack of contingency planning," Jarod was saying. Lyle could hear him through the one-way speaker system, the timbre of his usually deep voice was hoarse and shaking. Jarod sat before a table containing a cutaway model of a large transport airplane and an enlarged aerial photo of an area somewhere in Central America. "There has to be back up plans for every leg of the operation," Jarod continued. "To do this successfully, you need to break down the operation into separate segments." He pointed to the map. "We've already discussed the initial hijacking of the plane. The next segment is to confuse any pursuers. The client will need to construct an airstrip here and camouflage it from the possibility of satellite photos. No more than fifteen minutes before the craft lands, the runway should be cleared and prepared. A ground crew will be on alert to assist in moving the plane's contents to another craft. Then, the transponder from the original craft should be removed and placed into a decoy, preferably something with good maneuverability like a helicopter, or a vehicle that can be easily abandoned later on. The original craft should then be destroyed immediately. The new plane, painted with a fake tour logo and carrying the contraband, needs to be back in the air in ten minutes

and no longer. Total time between transport plane landing and new plane taking off is no more than 25 minutes. I suggest several trial runs through this segment before the actual job."

"What about the hijacked flight crew?" Raines asked in his raspy voice and breathed deeply. He placed a hand on the table, leaned over Jarod and stared at the photo.

Jarod lowered his head, his forearms on the table, his hands clenched. When he raised his head he looked directly into the two-way mirror as though he knew Lyle watched him. Lyle felt a chill travel up his spine at the rage he saw in Jarod's face.

"For the plan to work they have to be killed," Jarod said, his voice low and rough. He stood, his chair falling backwards as he swept an arm across the table. The contents fell to the floor, the plane model broke into pieces on the cold tiles.

"I won't do this!" he shouted to the one-way mirror. Raines straightened, drew away from him and backed into a corner.

"Looks like your lab rat is having a little temper tantrum," Brigitte said as she extracted a lollipop out of a jacket pocket.

"Trust me, it won't last long," Lyle said as he tipped his head toward the woman. He stood, leaned over and pressed a doorbell-like button attached to the wall beside the two-way mirror.

Jarod had turned and shoved Raines to the ground, then snatched a chair and dashed it against the one-way mirror, once, twice, three times. Spider cracks splintered across the reinforced glass. Then, the door to the sim room burst open and three men entered and rushed toward him. Jarod spun around swinging the chair and cracking one man over the head then swept it around smashing it into the side of another man. Two men down. The remaining man danced out of reach of the chair, keeping narrowed eyes on Jarod. Even in this weakened state, Jarod was still dangerous. Lyle pressed the button twice more.

"Does he do this often?" Brigitte asked with a lift of one brow and licked her lollipop.

"Not often, but later he's always very apologetic," Lyle replied unruffled as two more men and a doctor rushed into the room. Raines had been assisted to his feet and taken out of the room. It took three men to subdue Jarod. They held him down on the floor, pressing their weight onto his arms and legs as the doctor approached and injected a sedative into his bicep.

"Damn you Lyle!" Jarod bellowed.

"Excuse me a moment," Lyle said to Brigitte, stood and exited out of the observation room, walking around to the sim room. He entered and stood above Jarod.

"You're going to have to kill me. I don't care," Jarod shouted and struggled.

Lyle looked down at him and tsked, then drew back and kicked him in the ribs three times. He felt something giveaway and crack under the

second kick. He'd probably broken one of Jarod's ribs. Jarod's eyes closed, his breath whooshed from his lungs.

"You know that's gotta hurt," Lyle said, then lifted a foot and pressed it against Jarod's throat. "Centre reality check, Jarod. The Centre owns you. You are a tool. What ever needs to be done to ensure your cooperation will be pursued. And I can be very persuasive. Understand?" When Jarod didn't answer Lyle leaned his weight into his foot. Jarod gasped for air, but the defiant light in his eyes never dimmed.

Lyle watched the man for a moment before removing his foot. "Take him to the room."

* * * *

Miss Parker made her way through the cemetery to her mother's grave. Arriving at the grave she knelt down and propped an armful of flowers against the gravestone.

"I miss you," she said softly, and touched the ground with her fingertips, hoping that somehow her mother would know how much she was missed.

She stood and strolled through the quiet cemetery enjoying the early morning sunshine. She and the groundskeeper were the only ones present. Birds hidden among green boughs sang and the grass still glimmered with morning dew. She lingered despite a pressing urgency to get to the Centre. She knew Brigitte and Lyle were up to something, but so far she, Sydney and Broots hadn't found anything. That the Centre found excuses to send the three of them away on what she considered Wild Goose Chases made warning bells go off in her head. She had Broots looking through recent Centre records for anything odd. Despite the grief that she gave him, she trusted him and his hacking talents. If there was a secret in the Centre, he would find it.

She passed the groundskeeper. He crawled around on his hands and knees placing long rolls of sod in the bare earth. A gravestone had been pulled out of the ground and laid to one side.

"What happened?" Miss Parker asked. "Someone decide they weren't dead?"

The groundskeeper looked up and grimaced. "You ain't from the production company, are you?"

"Production company?" Miss Parker echoed.

"Guess not. We had folks filming some kind of movie here, and they used this gravesite. They were insistent that this area be returned to its original state, pronto. I didn't have the chance until today. I thought you were one of them coming to make certain the job had been done."

Miss Parker sauntered over to read the headstone and froze. Sydney Green? Events began clicking together like puzzle pieces in her head. She could think of only one funeral that Jarod would risk his freedom to attend. Her hands clenched at her side.

"Did you by chance meet any of the production people?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

"Not directly, but I did see a lady talking to the director. She had dark hair like yours, and blue eyes. She sucked on a lollipop--"

"If anyone asks, you haven't seen me," Miss Parker interrupted the man. "Got it?"

The groundskeeper swallowed. "Sure. I haven't seen anyone." He continued to work, studiously staring at the ground as Miss Parker walked away. At the end of the cemetery, by the parking lot where she had parked her Boxster, Miss Parker turned, scanned the cemetery and gathered her thoughts.

"This stinks of Lyle," she said to herself, pulled her cell phone out a coat pocket and hit a speed dial button.

* * * *

Sydney knelt down next to Angelo who lay curled up on the floor uncommunicative, his arms wrapped tightly over his head. He'd been like this for several days and Sydney hadn't been able to find any reason. His cell phone rang and he pulled it out of an inside suit pocket and flipped it open.

"This is Sydney," he answered after the second ring.

"Syd," Miss Parker said. "I'm at the cemetery. I need you and Broots here."

"Can you tell me what this is about?"

"Not now. Don't tell anyone where you're going."

"I'm in the middle of something. Can it wait?" He touched Angelo's head and the man trembled slightly and moaned.

"I don't think so. There's something here you need to see."

Sydney wondered what could be at a cemetery that he needed to see. "I'll be there as soon as I can." He returned the cell phone to a pocket.

"Pain and hurting," Angelo mumbled and curled up tighter. It was the first words Sydney had heard him speak in two days.

"Whose pain, Angelo?" Sydney said softly, placing a hand on the man's arm. Angelo shivered. He noticed Angelo's hand closed around something. Prying open his fingers was no easy task, and what he held at last was a small scrap of clothing. "Whose is this?" he asked gently.

"Hurting him. Make them stop." Angelo squeezed his eyes closed.

Sydney looked up at the sound of squeaking wheels and raspy breathing.

"What's wrong with him?" Raines asked, coming to stand over Sydney and Angelo.

"I don't know, I was hoping you could tell me," Sydney said.

Angelo opened one eye, spied Raines then began to sob. "Stop him!"

* * * *

"You took your time," Miss Parker said as Sydney and Broots climbed out of the automobile.

"I was detained," Sydney explained. "I couldn't excuse myself without rousing suspicion. What is it, Miss Parker."

"Come with me," she crooked a finger toward the two men and led them along a path to where the groundskeeper still lay sod on the exposed earth. She pointed to the gravestone. "Take a look."

Sydney shrugged, perplexed, then walked to the gravestone. Horror spread across his face while his lips moved silently reading the name and epitaph carved on the marble stone. Broots stood along side him; his gaze darted from the older man to Miss Parker.

"Is this a joke?" Broots asked.

"A joke is suppose to be funny," Miss Parker said. "

"Why does this gravestone have my name?" Sydney asked quietly.

"Now that is exactly what I want to know." She motioned them out of hearing range of the groundskeeper. "The groundskeeper described Brigitte to me. Now, what is the one thing that would draw Jarod out?"

"My death," Sydney said, then nodded.

"Jarod went to a funeral," Broots said. "You're funeral, Sydney. You think Brigitte and Lyle have Jarod?"

"Yes I do, and I think he's right under our noses."

She pointed up along the line of trees surrounding the east boundary of the cemetery. "Jarod would come to your funeral, but he wouldn't show himself. The clearest line of sight and also the best concealment would be from that ridge of trees up there. Let's look and see what we find."

The three of them swept the area for two hours. Miss Parker knew she'd have to call off their search soon, she didn't want anyone at the Centre becoming suspicious if they were out together too long. Neither Sydney nor Broots were in sight so she extracted her cell phone, flipped it open and called Sydney.

"Find anything?" she asked.

"A few footprints, nothing else. Broots and I crossed paths a few moments ago. He's here. He hasn't found anything."

"Damn," Miss Parker said softly. "We're going to have to pack it up-," her voice trailed off as her gaze swept the ground around her. "Hold on. I think I've found something."

"I believe we're south of you. We'll be right there," Sydney replied, but Miss Parker didn't hear. She folded up the cell phone and returned it to the pocket.

The ground and the leaves here had been disturbed. She looked around finding several dozen old faded footprints in the bare earth and more crushed leaves from a struggle of some sort. She then hunched down and stared closely at odd brown stains on the leaves. The stains had been smeared, probably by the rain. She looked up. Possibly the only reason the stains had not been washed away was due to the relative shelter by the tree boughs above. She picked up a leaf. The stains looked suspiciously like blood. The more she looked around her, the more blood she found. She knew there were a few types of wounds that bled this much. Head wounds and gunshot wounds came to mind.

She looked up as Broots and Sydney came into view. She motioned to them and held up a leaf.

"Blood," Broots said. He pulled a plastic bag and tweezers from his jacket. He plucked up a few of the leaves, put them in the bag and sealed it. "I can have the DNA on this checked."

"How soon?" Miss Parker asked.

Broots shrugged. "One of the guys in the lab is a friend of mine who owes me. He may have something by tomorrow evening."

* * * *

In the air conditioning vent, Angelo cringed, his back pressed against the smooth walls as he listened to the echo of hoarse screams. He pressed his hands to his ears attempting to shut out the sound and rocked back and forth, tears trickled down his face.

"Hurting," he mumbled. "They're hurting him."

Angelo wanted to help his friend but he couldn't, at least not on his own. The cell was too well guarded and Lyle was always around. Angelo was afraid of Lyle. His rocking stopped. He pulled his hands away from his ears then he turned and crouch-ran down the air duct toward the main area of the Centre.

* * * *

Only a desk lamp and the glow of the computer monitor lit up Broot's office. He sat at his desk and brought up his email, scanned the headers and clicked on one. "10pm and as promised here's the lab report, right on time." His eyes flicked back and forth as he read, then nodded. "That was Jarod's blood all right."

"And you have found nothing else?" Miss Parker failed to keep the impatience out of her voice.

"I've looked all over the Centre files, Miss Parker," Broots said. Sydney lounged in a chair near the door, alert for any sounds of

approaching footsteps. "I've broken into expense records and report files. I didn't find anything. Nothing is out of place. There's been a lot of money directed toward remodeling, but that isn't unusual. I don't think they have Jarod in the Centre. They must be holding him somewhere else."

"What are you thinking, Miss Parker," Sydney asked.

Miss Parker crossed her arms and leaned back against Broot's desk. "They have him here," she said. "The question in my mind is where would they hide him? Where would be the most unlikely place?" Her eyes narrowed. "SL27"

"Did you say SL27?" Broots shuddered. "It's been closed up since the explosion and the fire."

"I think we should take a look and see what we find," she said.

"Broots is right, Miss Parker, there is nothing down there. SL27 was destroyed."

"At least that is what they want us to think," she said looking between them. She could see the reluctance in their faces. She didn't blame them. After all, the explosion had temporarily taken Sydney's eyesight. Though he had recovered, there had been moments when she thought he'd never would. "Look, I don't like the place either, but if they are hiding Jarod why not hid him where no one would suspect?"

* * * *

The beams of flashlights stabbed the darkness as Miss Parker followed Broots and Sydney down the access ladder into SL27. She beamed her flashlight across the charred walls, the smell of old fire still in the air. She shivered and resisted the urge to wrap her arms around her. This place gave her the creeps. Broken glass and charred bits of unidentified objects crunched under their feet as they walked forward. Miss Parker halted, unwilling to go further. Her hunch had been wrong. Jarod wasn't down here. Nothing was down here. Sydney continues forward as he shinned his flashlight beam up at the ceiling and into empty, doorless rooms.

"Do you smell something odd?" Sydney asked as he walked to the doorway of a room, then back out.

Miss Parker grimaced. "Smells like burnt hair."

"No, something else. I smell it too," Broots said, turning a flashlight beam up at the old air ducts. "Smells like someone has been painting."

Miss Parker reluctantly took a big sniff. She smelled it too, the chemical odor of paint mingled with other unpleasant smells.

Sydney nodded. "Exactly. Now why would we smell paint down here?"

"Someone has decided SL27 would make a good fixer upper project?" Miss Parker suggested with a lift of one eyebrow. "Let's go."

Farther down the hallway they came up short against a wall.

"This wasn't here before," Sydney said.

"I don't remember it either," Miss Parker replied.

The wall appeared charred. Miss Parker leaned forward and sniffed. The wall held a faint odor of paint. She put out a finger and touched it and her finger came away clean without any black smudges.

"The wall has been painted to look burnt," Sydney said and he flashed his light over the wall and ran a hand over the smooth surface. "It's still tacky so it's been recently painted." He turned to Broots. "Is there any other way into SL27."

"Possibly the elevator on the east end of the building, but if it's working to this floor, it will be guarded," he replied, his gaze dropped to the floor and he shuffled his feet.

"Well?" Miss Parker prompted. "Are you going to tell us or are we going to have to guess?"

"There's the buildings air ducts and cooling system. I know where I can find a schematic."

"A guide would be better," Sydney said. "Angelo."

* * * *

Jarod lay on his cot and shivered, sweat soaked blankets and sheets. He simultaneously felt hot and cold, but the pain racing up his nerve endings never varied, never lessened. His hands had frozen into claws and his body wouldn't respond. He just laid and shivered and swallowed the screams that threatened to burst forth.

"I won't help you," he managed as another wave of icy shivers traveled up his body.

"You're too hard on yourself," Lyle's voice came from across the room. "And you're not doing yourself any favors. You cooperate and your life gets easier. It's that simple."

"I won't be responsible for the deaths of innocent people." Sweat poured down his forehead and stung his eyes as he tried to focus on Lyle.

"Now that is funny," Lyle said and laughed, his tone humorless. "All this denial. Jarod, you are responsible for more death and destruction than even I can imagine, and I can image a lot. And this clinging to false heroics is ludicrous." Jarod could hear the rustle of Lyle's clothing as moved across the room. "Make certain you give him enough that he stays like this all night," Lyle said to someone.

"Well, it's late and I'm leaving. I have a feeling you'll be feeling differently about this in the morning. Sleep on it, will you?" Lyle laughed.

Jarod heard Lyle's footsteps recede. Someone moved close to him. He felt the prick of a needle in his arm, then heard footsteps and the door closing. He was alone.

And the agony began.

Tremors racked his body and fingers of pain raced up every nerve ending. He tumbled off the bed to the cold concrete floor. He opened his eyes and watched the walls of his cell melted like lava, glowing streaming of burning yellow-light oozed toward his body. The acrid smell of burning flesh rose around him. Ghost-like tendrils of smoke filled the room as the lava flowed over his body and into his eyes, into his mouth, consuming him, burning him alive.

He began to scream.

* * * *

"What the hell is that?" Miss Parker paused in the air duct.

"Sounds like screaming," Broots said and cocked his head.

"He's hurting," Angelo mumbled. "Hurting bad. Lyle hurting him. Hurry."

"This is what Angelo has been saying for the last few days. I think he's been referring to Jarod." Sydney grasped Angelo's arm. "Who is Lyle hurting, Angelo?"

"Hurting," Angelo said and flinched. He pulled away from Sydney and scurried down the air conditioning duct.

Miss Parker glanced at Sydney and Broots, a chill running up her spine as another scream echoed up to them.

"That is Jarod...?" Sydney and Broots looked as unsettled as she felt. She couldn't image what would make Jarod scream this way.

"Hurry," said Angelo looking over his shoulder. "He needs your help."

The air conditioning duct ended at a metal grating that opened into a sterile white hallway, freshly painted, Miss Parker noted. SL27 had been resurrected. Miss Parker climbed out first. The screams were louder here, and the shrill panic in those screams made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Angelo shook his head, fear lurking in his eyes, and sat back on his haunches. She knew he'd be there to help them escape from SL27.

"Guard down there," Angelo pointed.

Miss Parker nodded and drew her gun as Broots and Sydney climbed out of the air duct. "Let me take care of this."

The gun held firmly in both hands, Miss Parker crept down the hall, the screams masking the sound of her footsteps. A man stood with his back to her as he stared toward the source of the screams coming from a room a half dozen doors away. She crept up beside him.

"Boo!" she said in his ear. He flinched, started to turn then halted at the gun barrel pressed into the soft area below his jaw. "Get down on your knees," Miss Parker ordered between clenched teeth. He hesitated and she cocked the gun. "You could say I'm not really a happy camper at the moment, so don't give me any reason to pull the trigger." The man fell to his knees. "You're lucky that this is all I have time for." She slammed the butt of the gun down twice on the back of his head. He collapsed to the floor. "I'm saving the best part for Lyle," she said to the unconscious man. She turned as Sydney and Broots joined her.

The screams had turned to whimpers and they followed the sounds to a cell room. An electronic passcode device was mounted on the wall. A steel pull-back latch with a solid red indicator light secured the door. Miss Parker peered in through the small, reinforced glass window set into the door.

"Oh god," she whispered. "It's Jarod. Broots, can you get this door open?"

"I... I think so," Broots replied and nodded. He looked in through the window, glanced away quickly, shuddered then directed his attention on the passcode device. "It may be rigged to set off a silent alarm if the wrong code is entered. I need something to pop off the cover."

Miss Parker patted her coat pockets, then pulled out a metal fingernail file. "Will this do?"

"It'll have to," Broots said, and started working.

"Oh, and Broots." Miss Parker tapped his shoulder. He turned and looked at her. "Hurry, will you?"

Miss Parker looked again into the window. Sydney stared, horror in his eyes.

"What have they done to him?" he finally managed.

"Knowing Lyle, any number of gruesome guesses is probably true or close to the truth."

On the floor Jarod lay twitching and shivering. His arms crossed over his face as though warding off phantasms only he could see.

"Why would they do this to Jarod?" Miss Parker said more to herself, hardly able to believe that even Lyle would stoop to this. Then again, evidence still suggested he had killed his mail order bride. Lyle, she believed, was capable of almost anything to get what he wanted.

"I know Jarod would not willingly work with Lyle, but there are ways to coherence and break down even the strongest will," Sydney said.

The red light on the latch blinked then turned solid green and the internal door latch mechanisms clicked.

"Broots, you're a genius," Miss Parker said and meant it as she threw

back the latch and entered the room. She stood at the door to keep an eye on the outside corridor while Sydney ran over to Jarod and knelt beside him.

"Jarod?" he said softly and pulled Jarod's arms away from his face. He then peeled back the eyelids and looked at the dilated pupils. "They have him drugged." Sydney looked around then pointed to a wastebasket. "See what you can find, Miss Parker."

Usually Miss Parker would protest over being ordered to go through someone's trash, but this was not the time. She quickly found two syringes and held them up.

"Save them," Sydney said. "We'll need them to figure what they've been giving Jarod."

"Sydney?" Jarod said, his eyes fluttered open, his voice rough and barely audible. "I must be dead."

Sydney motioned to Broots, and together they lifted Jarod off the floor, propping him between them, shrugging his arms over their shoulders. "We're going to get you out of here."

* * * *

Jarod looked like hell, Miss Parker thought as she sat in the corner of the bedroom. His skin was pale and pasty looking, and dark circles underlined his eyes. He'd lost weight; the clothes Sydney and Broots removed from him had hung like rags. Sydney brought sedatives for him and the plastic brown bottles sat on the nightstand next to the table. Jarod would go through withdrawals Sydney had explained, and the sedatives would lessen the symptoms. The best thing for him was food and rest. Right now he was sleeping, albeit restlessly, better than the screaming and his hallucinations they had to deal with earlier. Toward sunrise, they had finally calmed him down. She looked at her watch. It was 7:30am.

"Why, it's Miss Parker. As they say, the devil you know is better than the devil you don't," said a weak voice.

Miss Parker looked up. "How do you feel?" She walked over and knelt next to the bed. She rested one hand on his arm, then ran her fingers through his hair lifting it off his sweaty forehead.

"Like someone is using my head as an anvil," Jarod groaned.

She smiled faintly. She now understood what "hell warmed over" looked like, and it looked like Jarod. She reached over, retrieved a glass of water off the nightstand and offered it to him. He took it, and she helped tilt his head up so he could drink. Even that effort exhausted him and fell back to the bed.

"I remember seeing Sydney," he said after a moment.

"He's coming to take over watch in a few minutes," Miss Parker said.

"He's not dead?"

"No. One of Lyle's tricks."

"I fell right into it." His mouth twisted in self-derision.

"You can't be a genius all the time," Miss Parker tried to sooth him. He studied the room for a moment.

"Where am I?"

"A safehouse away from the Centre. More importantly, away from Lyle." She placed the glass back on the night table.

"You rescued me?"

"Rescued?" She stood and moved away from him, staring out the dust-crusted window at the dilapidated neighborhood two stories below. How could she return him to a place that treated him worse than an animal? She closed her eyes a moment and took a breath. It was her job and duty to the Centre to bring Jarod in. She couldn't let him go, but neither could she return him to the conditions she'd just risked her life to take him away from.

"Why did you rescue me?" his voice sounded a little stronger, more demanding, and more like the Jarod she knew.

She turned back to the man on the bed, her hands clasped behind her back. "Don't kid yourself, Jarod. I may not agree with Lyle's techniques, however you are going back to the Centre but it will be my conditions." She walked out of the room at that, her way of avoiding any more uncomfortable conversations with Jarod. She closed the door behind her and came face to face with Sydney. She knew he'd heard her parting remarks to Jarod.

"Jarod is not a commodity to be used for bargaining," Sydney said softly. "Need I remind you he is a human being."

"Jarod is a product of the Centre. He belongs to the Centre," Miss Parker said with more conviction than she felt. She stared at Sydney a moment and for the first time really wondered if she could trust him. She had to, there was no one else. She needed him to make Jarod well again. "Sam will be relieving you in a few hours. I have to get to the Centre at my regular time."

"Miss Parker," Sydney's voice stopped her as she made her way to the door. "I want Jarod back as much as you, but not like this."

"We have a bargaining chip, Syd, we have Jarod and we have it in our power to dictate the terms of his return."

* * * *

Miss Parker sat at her desk and as the door to her office flung inward, she looked up meeting her brother's eyes across the room.

"Problems?" she asked. Lyle came across the room to her desk, planted his hands on the desktop and leaned toward her.

"You tell me, sister," he ground out.

"What got your undies in a bunch?" She leaned back in her chair and

regarded her bother steadily.

"You have him. Where did you take him?"

"And who might 'he' be?"

"Don't play dumb."

Miss Parker drew her 9mm, cocked it and fired. The sound of the unsilenced weapon thundered in the room as the bullet thudded into the wall behind Lyle. She had the satisfaction of seeing him flinch. She stood, leaned on her desk, her face inches from Lyle's.

"Get the hell out of my office. Next time I won't miss."

Lyle hesitated then backed off, never taking his eyes off the gun she held in her hand. "This isn't finished."

"You're right," Miss Parker replied, "it isn't."

End

To be continued in Damage Control... ****

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3. Chapter Three: Damage
Control